

Driven to HELP

Once homeless, Rhonda Callanan and Sarah Ruddle now cook free meals for their community out of a food truck.

BY JULIA FAWAL

Six years ago, Rhonda Callanan and Sarah Ruddle were both homeless. Rhonda, now 52, fled an abusive marriage with her teenage daughter, Maddy, and little more than a suitcase. Sarah, now 34, had injured her shoulder in the Army and, after three surgeries, couldn't find work. She spent most nights in her car.

That is, until a couple from a mutual friend's church in Howell, MI, offered the women a place to stay. Rhonda and Maddy lived in the basement apartment while Sarah slept in a spare bedroom.

"As Sarah and I got to know each other and talked about what we'd been through, we realized that we both wanted to help feed people," says Rhonda.

Later that year, Rhonda, who was working as a high school teacher's aide, got a second job at a video store and was finally able to afford her own apartment. Sarah worked as a cashier at a pizzeria and continued to live with the family. As Rhonda and Sarah brainstormed ideas, Sarah thought of a food truck. "It's mobile and cheaper than opening a restaurant," she says. Adds Rhonda, "We wanted to go into underserved areas and cook meals for people who needed something to eat."



"We're providing fresh, balanced meal," says Sarah, *below right*, with Rhonda. The team celebrated a milestone in 2015.

Rhonda and Sarah found a used delivery truck for sale online, and in June 2014, a mutual friend surprised them with a \$20,000 donation to retrofit the truck with an oven, fridge and stove. They had previously registered as a nonprofit called The Torch and began their mobile mission later that year. "We came up with the name because when people are in the dark, they look for a source of light. We want to be that light," says Rhonda.

Two nights a week, Rhonda and Sarah park the truck in one of three needy neighborhoods in Howell to prepare tacos, pasta or other meals for the residents. Dozens of people gather with lawn chairs to eat and visit with their neighbors. Volunteers play games with the kids so the adults can relax. "We didn't plan on the community-building part," says Rhonda. "Our focus is treating everyone kindly. People respond well to that."

"We know that this food truck isn't going to solve every problem," Rhonda adds. "Our aim is to remind



people that there is hope."

In the last two years, The Torch has dished out nearly 15,000 free meals. Next year, Rhonda and Sarah plan to open a restaurant in a nearby town, funded by donations and staffed entirely with disabled people from the community. The two women recently quit their jobs to concentrate on running the nonprofits full-time.

"People often say to us, 'You have no idea how much this meal means to me,'" says Rhonda. "But actually we do, because we've been there."

Donate to The Torch at mobiletorch.org.

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